

PSYCHODYNAMIC PERSPECTIVES ON ADULT LEARNING GROUPS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to stimulate thinking among adult educators about how unconscious factors and a participant's internal world influence the adult learning group. The paper includes excerpts from conversations and interviews with three participants of the same learning group. A psychodynamic perspective was used to understand how the group process affected the learning of these three group participants. The use of a psychodynamic orientation includes the belief that the unique reality of each group member is influenced by temperament, life experience, family of origin, and unconscious processes. Despite the challenges and the seriousness of questions that have been raised by critics of psychoanalysis, it offers a way to look at adult learning which considers multiple perspectives and it recognizes areas that are beyond our conscious awareness yet affect our behavior and learning.

Introduction

Group work is often used as a teaching strategy in the adult education classroom. The tangled intricacy of the group system is often overlooked in an effort to achieve a predetermined learning objective. The dynamics that take place in the group setting are complex, relational, and different for each individual. The relational and social conditions that are available in the group setting offer abundant possibilities for learning when observed from a psychodynamic perspective.

When I experienced the group structure of a research activity in which I was a participant disintegrate, I began to search for a more complete understanding of the group experience. The data that follows are largely derived from the authors lived experience in the group. After the group ended, I talked with other members of the group, took notes, read, and thought about what happened. The data consists of stories about times when the group process had not gone well and then my best attempts to understand how that happened. Consequently, you will read the ruminations of a researcher as a critically engaged interpreter who uses a psychodynamic perspective.

Psychodynamic Perspectives

Before relating the stories I want to give some background information from psychodynamic theory that will be used to analyze and explain the data and my interpretation of the stories. Psychodynamic psychology is based on the theory of psychoanalysis. Psychodynamic and psychoanalytic are terms that will be used interchangeably in this paper. Lemma-Wright (1995) explains an integral component of the psychodynamic perspective, "The idea of psychological conflict,...is central to the psychodynamic perspective. ...It was one of Freud's great insights that our experiences are dynamic – that is, the outcome of conflicting forces, ideas and wishes" (p. 13). Also, past relations, especially parent-child relations can be unconsciously transferred into group settings and other daily social relations at primarily an unconscious level. There is a tendency for group members to interact in the group as they did in their family of origin. An individual's temperament and life experiences will also influence his/her perception of the group learning encounter.

As will be discussed later in the paper, I argue that the group member had an identity investment in his/her positioning in the group experience discourse. By using the defended subject concept as described by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), I will explore why the group members invest in certain discourses rather than others. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) explain their theory of the defended subject:

This argument assumes that threats to the self create anxiety, and indeed

this is a fundamental proposition in psychoanalytic theory, where anxiety is viewed as being inherent in the human condition. For psychoanalysis, anxiety precipitates defences against the threats it poses to the self and these operate at a largely unconscious level. The shared starting point of all the different schools of psychoanalytic thought is this idea of a dynamic unconscious which defends against anxiety and significantly influences people's actions, lives and relations (p. 19)

The group member will be posited as a psychosocial subject who cannot be understood without knowledge of his/her external experiences and how his/her internal world interpret and make meaning of the external experiences.

Same Group, Different Perspective

Most of the members of the group knew each other well, having participated in other classes together. Initially, the group process seemed to flow smoothly. Every member of the group was a novice researcher; nervous but excited about tackling the research project. The group quickly bonded and our work sessions were productive. Although there were various personalities in the group, ranging from the introverted to the boisterous, each person contributed equally to the project. This was a serious group, each with strong ideas and personality. On the final night of class our group was scheduled to present the findings from our research. About three weeks prior to the last night we began to develop our presentation. Each group member was strongly invested in his or her portion of the presentation and our critique sessions rapidly lost structure. People began talking over each other and the atmosphere in the room became highly charged.

This is the point where the experiences began to diverge. The tension created by the anticipation of the upcoming deadline and presentation combined with each group members' history, individual temperament, and unconscious processes are manifest in the unique reactions to the same group experience. The same experience, told from a different perspective, began to sound reminiscent of eyewitness accounts of an accident; similarities exist yet each version contains a different emphasis and insight. Similar to the variation in eyewitness accounts, the accounts of the preparation of our final presentation by members of the group are different. Each account represents the unique reality of the group member.

The people in the anecdotes presented in this paper are real but names and other identifying features have been disguised so as to preserve confidentiality. My story has also been included as an excerpt and labeled as *Janice*. For purposes of clarity the material has also been condensed and only the themes relevant to the concept being illustrated are outlined. It is not my intent to give the impression that the understanding of the group experience through psychodynamic theory is a straightforward matter; deciphering the multi-layered meanings in the group experience is very complex and can sometimes be lost through the process of condensing the stories. These are my interpretations based on my knowledge of psychodynamic concepts and ideas.

Janice's Story

Janice: I felt overwhelmed and very uncomfortable with the group dynamics. The bombardment of voices and questions were coming too fast, from too many people at once, and they were too loud; it felt as though I was being attacked. It was difficult for me to unfreeze my mind enough to be able to explain, in an articulate and relaxed way, how I had arrived at my findings. I froze and wasn't able to gain back my space in the group. It was not the kind of learning environment that I enjoyed.

When the group project ended, my initial reaction was to forget the matter, chalk it up to personality differences, and offer the “excuse” that it “was not a healthy learning environment for me”. In reality this was a defensive stand. I now believe that my reaction to the way feedback was being delivered by group members felt extremely threatening to me. Initially I did not want to look at this issue but rather defended against the anxiety that I felt by saying that “this was not a healthy learning environment for me”.

With time I began to search for an understanding of the group experience by examining my own past. The psychodynamic approach maintains that in order to understand our present day behavior we must uncover our past. The first group that I experienced was my family group. Within that experience I developed the norms and expectations that influence my present behavior in any group setting. The pattern set in this early learning carries on to this day and consequently played out in my reaction to the group experience.

As the third of four daughters from a white, middle class, conservative southern family who handles disagreement indirectly rather than openly, my family role models for healthy conflict are limited. For example, recently my youngest sister sensed, at a family birthday celebration, that my second sister was alienated over something. She e-mailed me and called my oldest sister to relate the circumstances. In classic family style the eldest then called sister number two in an attempt to uncover the mystery. Indeed this is a scenario that illustrates the way in which my family members commonly deal with conflict in the family group.

My own experience in the research group is an example of “interference” as described by Britzman (1998):

In positing education as a question of interference (as opposed to an engineered development), we have a very different epistemology and ontology of actions, and actors: one that insists that the inside of actors is as complicated as the outside, and that this combination is the grounds of education. Not only does the world impinge cruelly upon the subject, and not only does the subject’s inner world constitute the be-all of understanding and misunderstanding: the subject lives both dilemmas in ways that cannot be predicted, authorized by another, or even deliberately planned and separated. (p. 6)

The interference of the highly charged feedback by the group members conflicted with my internal need for a more removed and distant delivery of feedback. By tolerating the anxiety I was able to work through the interference and gain instruction from the experience. The external world of the institutional and group setting “impinged cruelly upon” my internal world. Initially I clung to the notion that the highly charged atmosphere was not a healthy learning environment for me; I claimed that my learning was impaired. When I was able to lower my anxiety enough to tolerate this interference and work through it, my learning increased. However, it is important to note that the benefit of time, space, and reflection away from the group experience enhanced the learning and resolution that occurred for me. Indeed this approach to learning is complicated and requires long patience but the learning is rich. Britzman explains, “Neither internal nor external reality is simple. To tolerate this insight is just the beginning of what Freud calls ‘working through’ or learning” (p. 6).

Although my family of origin used indirect behavior when conflict arose in the family, it became apparent that the indirect model had not been effective in this particular context. Yet my investment in an indirect manner of dealing with conflict allowed me to legitimate and protect the indirect and triangular fashion in which my family handles conflict and more generally the distance and secrecy promoted by this way of dealing with conflict. However, the family way of dealing with conflict also prevented me from claiming my space within the group.

Rita’s Story

Rita: And the response was I wanted to crawl under the table. ... And that the people’s whose work was up there at the moment were feeling attacked by other

people's critiques or suggestions of that work. And then many people would be talking simultaneously. ... So for me what happened was those people who had a certain strength and a certain type of personality were the ones who were heard. And there was another group of people who tended to be much more, I'm not sure if introverted is the right term – but maybe that's true. They were more in terms of conflict, instead of getting in there and being the bulldozer - their response was to pull back. So you have this one group of people that were playing the role of victim and being submissive. And you have this other group of people that were playing the role of bully. And so, for me, it became extremely uncomfortable.

Rita was in conflict about her own aggressive and submissive feelings. She talked about the fact that her aggressive behavior had been discouraged in her family, at school, and by society. For example, she stated,

And so that part of me that is really strong and comes out like a bulldozer was interpreted within the family as being really detrimental to my sister who's thirteen months younger than I am because it would bulldoze over her...and then because it's inappropriate, I sink down into victim, which I also know is inappropriate behavior and so there is no ground on which to stand. I have not found that middle, that middleground.

Rita was in conflict with her knowledge that playing the victim is not healthy yet her family experiences did not encourage assertiveness. When the conflict was most intense in the work group, Rita saw the group members become either bullies or victims. Rita describes these dynamics, "So you have this one group of people that were playing the role of victim and being submissive. You have this other group of people that were playing the role of bully."

The behavior that a group member displays, especially in stressful situations, may be repeated from past family interactions and experience within the family system. My own family experience leads me to withdraw in group settings where conflict becomes intense. Rita struggled with being able to find solid "ground" to stand upon. Another group member explained that his own family encouraged assertiveness and direct engagement when conflict surfaced. His behavior and reaction to the conflict that occurred in the research group was much different than Rita's reaction and my reaction. Rita and I believe that learning stopped on the evenings where conflict was openly hostile in the group. The conflict felt hostile to me, however, another group member has stated that he does not believe the conflict was hostile but healthy. It is this group member's perspective of the group experience that we will turn to next.

Sam's Story

Sam: It was just a group of intellectually charged individuals working under pressure. Happens all the time, and I'm glad it does. Sometimes I come away from such a session with a bruised ego, but I always come away smarter. ... For good or bad, most academic settings—faculty meetings, project work, discussion groups—work like this group worked. And, unfortunately, many are also characterized by abuse, manipulation, and ego games ...; I've had to learn to survive those too, but it's a constant struggle.

Sam talked in vivid detail about his working class background. "Being loud and clever was rewarded. Children could walk into a group of adults and tell a joke. Proactivity and assertiveness were valued in my background. I don't aspire to be dignified, so the whole early stuff was loud jokes, funny, exciting. People could fight and disagree. A clever disagreement at the dinner table was highly valued. An Italian house is a loud house."

Sam thought the aggressive feedback sessions were "good". In an e-mail message to the group members he stated, "I don't see a problem. No one was abusing anyone, no one was trying to win or play ego games." We have already learned about the communication model that was used

and encouraged in Sam's family of origin. The model that Sam's family used was in stark contrast to the quieter and less well-defined model that Rita and I experienced.

If we use Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) concept of the defended subject to interpret Sam's reaction - then we can question why Sam invested in discourse that protected this perspective of the group experience. Sam has already told us that he does not "aspire to be dignified". Although Sam used the word dignified (which has a positive connotation) to describe the way he doesn't want to be, he also described his way of behaving as loud, funny, exciting, and clever. Sam's brother is a police officer and Sam has expressed a tendency on the part of his brother to characterize Sam's scholarly inclination as uppity. Sam also stated, "I like being the way I am, I don't aspire to be boring, I don't aspire to be dignified. That's not what I want to be." In the previous statement Sam equates dignified with boring. I maintain that Sam had an identity investment in his aggressive style of disagreement and may feel threatened by the possibility of being perceived as dull, pompous, and unexciting. Could it be that the unconscious and conscious are engaged in a struggle where the conscious mind is aware of the unconscious murmurs but cannot understand nor fully access their meaning? Fenwick (2001) describes this struggle:

The conscious mind, on the other hand, is both ignorant and partially aware of its own ignorance. The consciousness is thus anxious about its own uncertain, impartial knowledge, its limited ability to know, and its fragile boundaries and existence. This anxiety generates resistance to learning, as for example when we fight concepts which, even if we suspect their value, fundamentally challenge our existing beliefs or draw us into a question we would rather not pursue. (p. 31)

Sam may unconsciously need to hold on to the family style of being loud, exciting, and assertive in an attempt to defend his place in the family and society rather than being perceived as dignified and boring.

Critiques and Thoughts on the Use of Psychoanalysis

When psychoanalysis was originally developed by Sigmund Freud, it was thought to be a highly subversive discipline because of its central themes of sexuality and aggression. Lemma-Wright (1995) offers another explanation for the rebellion against psychoanalysis:

It undoubtedly posed a serious challenge to the belief in conscious thought as the ultimate datum of human experience by invoking the central idea that there are areas of our experience which are beyond our conscious awareness, but which nonetheless affect our behavior – from behind the scenes as it were. (pg. 2)

Other criticisms that have been launched against psychoanalysis are that it is expensive in terms of time and money, irrelevant as a treatment method for the very sick and the socially disadvantaged, and that there is an absence of satisfactory data showing the effectiveness of the method (Lemma-Wright, 1995; Rabkin, 1970). Also, many feminists are angered by traditional Freudian theory because of the idea of penis envy and related concepts that paint an unflattering portrait of women (Ryan, 2001; Tong, 1998). Ryan (2001) maintains, "Psychoanalysis has frequently been dismissed as bourgeois, as highly culturally specific while purporting to be universal, and as anti-feminist". (p. 48)

Some of Freud's original ideas have since developed and evolved into different theories of personality development and psychotherapy (Cole, 1998; Lemma-Wright, 1995). Recently, psychoanalytic theory is enjoying a renaissance and is specifically being used to illuminate educational theory (Britzman, 1998; Fenwick, 2000, 2001; Ryan, 2001). In a discussion of the dominant approaches used in adult education to understand experiential learning, Fenwick (2001) presents the critiques of those approaches as, "managing adults' experience." "... focus on mental processing, the unproblematic view of identifiable 'concrete' experience, the assumption that individuals engage in and reflect upon their experiences as unitary independent selves, and the assumption that individuals are split from their contexts" (p. 1). In contrast, Fenwick (2001) characterizes the advantages of applying ideas from psychoanalytic theory to adult education

practice, "The contribution of psychoanalytic theory to experiential learning is its demonstration of the limits of conscious reflection on lived experience" (p. 33). Often we assume that what happens in a group is primarily influenced by the way in which the group is set up and facilitated. However, much that happens in the group setting is beyond the control of the adult educator.

Conclusion

The adult educator's practice can benefit by an understanding that each group member in his/her class may have a different experience and a unique reality in regard to the same experience. I argue that there are learning opportunities that are lost or misunderstood when group work is simply used as a way in which to vary the presentation of content, to provide a more dynamic learning environment, or to achieve a learning objective. Adult education has embraced the use of group based learning but has not welcomed the underlying dynamics that are present in the ambivalence, depths, and unconscious processes that are ever present in the group experience. I propose the use of a psychodynamic framework to gain a deeper understanding of the intricate learning dynamics that occur in adult learning groups. The tension between the internal and external world of the learner can provide knowledge that is sometimes overlooked in the hectic demand to cover cognitive learning objectives and content. The use of an approach to group work that incorporates concepts from psychoanalytic research can uncover rich new sites for learning and development in the practice of adult learning groups.

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